

Encounter with God: Pedagogical implications of the human experience of spirit for religious education of adults in the church

Dent C. Davis
Columbia Theological Seminary

Abstract

The results of this year long qualitative study of church participants' experiences of spirit and pedagogical implications for the practice of adult education in parish settings suggest the need to broaden assumptions, extend theoretical perspectives, and expand the practice of adult religious education in congregational settings.

Introduction

Interest in spirit is exploding in popular and scholarly literature (Lerner, 2000; Tickle, 1995; Roof, 1999). Literature of world religions has long attested the importance of spirit, however, an increasingly wide variety of interdisciplinary fields are regularly reporting on spiritual matters, fields as diverse as business, psychology, cultural studies, social work, and general education. The intersection of the interest in the study of spirit in the general culture, religious education in the church, and the lived experience of active church members is largely unexamined.

According to the Search Institutes' national study of effective Christian education only 28% of adults involved in the 493 congregations surveyed participate in the church's religious education program (Benson & Eklin, 1990). This lack of participation stands in stark contrast to research reporting a marked increase in people's interest in and study of spiritual matters (Roof, 1999; Fuller, 2001; Wuthnow, 1998). This contrast raises questions about the efficacy of traditional educational models in meeting the spiritual needs of church members. Despite an historical emphasis on spiritual experience in religious education exemplified by the use of terms such as conversion, nurture, catechesis, faith development, and a personal relationship with God (Foster, 1994; Pazmino, 1997), the dominant theoretical educational models used in the church emphasize content, outcomes, and method. Not surprisingly, of the adults who attend church approximately one third make their spiritual quest apart from the church (Benson & Eklin, 1990; Woolever & Bruce, 2002; Carroll, 2000). According to Thompson (1995), church members point to a dissatisfaction with the institution and its programming and a lack of opportunity to talk about their spiritual experiences in the church, citing an emphasis on "a deep hunger for direct experience with God rather than a 'second hand faith'" (p.4).

Findings from telephone interviews with over 1000 residents of North Carolina and southern California explained that "66% percent [of respondents] agreed that a person should arrive at his or her religious beliefs independently of any church or religious group" (Carroll, 2000, p. 34). Even among church members who describe themselves as a part of the Reformed tradition, who join Reformed churches as a way to challenge the individualism, fragmentation, and pluralism perceived in the church at large, Cimino (1997) reports that there is a tendency to select and emphasize some elements of tradition while ignoring others. As Cimino (1997)

describes, “They have retrieved and reformulated elements” (p. 62) to meet their needs. Many today are “seeking” their own authentic experience of spirit, looking in many places in an eclectic fashion (Roof, 1993).

A better understanding of the spiritual experiences of active church members could extend pedagogical models of religious education, increase the effectiveness of adult learning experiences in congregations, and enrich practice in adult religious education. The purpose of this study was to illuminate the spiritual experiences of adult church members and the relationship these experiences have to learning in order to identify the implications they have for the practice of adult religious education in the church.

Key assumptions guided this study: an ontological assumption that essential reality was not external to the individual but rather a product of experience and that “experience is an indispensable clue to understanding” (Polanyi, 1962, p. 150); an epistemological assumption that the process of knowing is experiential; an assumption concerning human nature that the human subject actively participates in the process of knowledge identification and that knowledge is not a pre-determined “given;” a postmodern assumption that understanding is particular to the individual without favoring, *a priori*, a more general understanding (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Lather, 1991); and an assumption that a particular understanding is always affected by its context (Elias & Merriam, 1994).

In this study the experience of spirit is understood to include “those private experiences that contain, in some form, a contact with a realm that is greater than the self” (Spencer, 1992, p. 4). The experience is subjective and includes “feelings, acts and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1994/1902, p. 42). Adult learning is understood as a process of “attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one's behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills” (Merriam & Clark, 1993, p.131).

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used because they were consistent the purpose of the study (Garrison & Shale, 1994) which was to understand experiences of the phenomenon of spirit “from the point of view of those acting” (Brookfield, 1990a, p. 2). Qualitative methods supported the heuristic dimension of the study, allowing discoveries to be made about the phenomenon (Kirk & Miller, 1986) as participants sought to understand their experience and share their perceptions in order to make sense of a complex phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Rather than testing a theory, use of these methods allowed the theory to emerge from the data (Brookfield, 1990a). The study procedures for data collection are common in educational research and congruent with spiritual practice.

Data collection took place over a twelve month period. Participants were asked to describe experiences that they believed led to spiritual growth in a journal for a month. In addition to journal entries, each person participated in an individual interview, two group interviews, and a final written reflection on their experience. Data were electronically transcribed and entered into the QSR NVivo data analysis software program. The QSR NVivo software facilitated the constant comparison of data across subjects and data sources over time (Miles & Huberman, 1984), allowing codes to be updated and the coding scheme to emerge from the data.

The process of member checking, inviting participants to review the themes as they emerged, was also used to help clarify the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Study Site

The Mainline Presbyterian Church was the site for this study. The church has a congregation of approximately 1700 members, is located in a small city in an affluent suburban neighborhood, and was founded more than 50 years ago. The site was selected because it was the church where the researcher served as Associate Pastor. The congregation engaged in a wide variety of ministries both inside and outside the church, such as supporting ten international missionaries, annually building a house for Habitat for Humanity, regularly collecting food and working with over a dozen local charities.

Members of the congregation had a higher level of education and income than the population as a whole. Over 70% of the adult members of the congregation had received a college degree. This compares to the local community where 14% of the population describe themselves as college graduates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The Mainline Presbyterian Church is an example of a strong religious culture with well-defined customs, language, and symbols (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Weekly worship was a central part of the church's program with an average of 500 in attendance. Long time members described the rituals and vocabulary of worship as comfortable and understandable. "Traditional" is a descriptor that was often used for the church's programs including the educational program for adults. Most educational activities took place in classrooms and were based on published curriculum that was presented by a teacher. Many classes took place as a part of Sunday school, a series of hour-long Sunday morning classes taught by lay volunteers focused on some aspect of Bible study (Lynn & Wright, 1971). In addition to the seven classes that comprised Sunday School, the church offered at least ten other weekly learning opportunities for adults. Over 250 adults or about 19% of the membership participated in these learning programs. Of the seventeen formal learning programs offered each week, all but two could be classified as "traditional Bible studies," where a teacher facilitated the explanation, discussion, and application of a Bible passage. As one member said referring to her class, "The class hasn't changed much in the ten years I have attended."

In addition to formal learning experiences in the Mainline Presbyterian Church, members frequently engaged in a number of individually focused learning experiences such as use of the church library including print, audio, and video resources. A growing number of church members also utilized the computer and Internet.

Study Participants

The study sample was made up of twelve members of the Mainline Presbyterian Church who volunteered to participate in the study. Participants had been members of the church for an average of 22 years (N=12) and had been a part of some type of Christian church for an average of 41 years. Each participant attended one of the church's educational programs with 58% attending on a weekly basis. Participants had remarkably diverse backgrounds even though they shared church membership. Each of the twelve participants in this study had a Bachelors degree and eight of the twelve (66%) also had a Masters degree or a professional degree.

Eight of the participants were female and four were male. All were European American with the exception of one participant who was Japanese American. Their ages varied. Six of the eight females classified themselves as "middle adults" in age. Ellie was Asian American, had

two small children, was a physician. Ellie grew up in a traditional Japanese Christian family and was part of the church for most of her life. Ginny was a business owner and had two grown daughters. She did not grow up in the Presbyterian Church and did not attend any church for years until her husband's death when she began attending regularly and assumed a leadership role. Sarah was self employed and had three children, two of whom were in college. Sarah and her family became very active in the church during her young adult years. Angela's second marriage occurred after a difficult divorce. By training and professional experience, she was a music teacher. Angela had been very active in various churches during her adult years. She had two grown children and during the time of this study was not employed outside the home. Joy also experienced a difficult divorce and was happily remarried. She grew up in the Episcopal Church but became active in the Presbyterian Church when she remarried. Joy participated in the church but not "too often." She was involved in the management of property and investments. Polly previously worked in an office and was very active in the church and had been since she was a young mother. Polly had two children still in school. The two remaining females in the study classified themselves as "older adults." Jennifer was a trained church educator with a Masters Degree and was a member of the Mainline Presbyterian Church for over 40 years. She described herself as a life-long Presbyterian. After her children were grown, she focused on the "joys of grandchildren." June, also a member and leader in the Mainline Presbyterian Church for over 40 years, was an experienced educator. Both Jennifer and June were actively involved in a number of different service activities, both as a part of the church's ministry and in the community at large.

Four males participated in the study. Jack and Will, both practicing attorneys, classified themselves as "young adults." Jack was recently married. Jack and his spouse both grew up in the church and had been very involved in youth activities. Jack completed his law degree and passed the bar examination during the time of this study. Will was married and had two young children. Will had a Baptist background and came to the Mainline Presbyterian Church after his marriage. He described himself as an active church member, a person who loved to write and learn new things.

Dick and Milton classified themselves as "middle adults" in age. Dick was an administrator in a high school and was very active in the life of the church as a teacher and small group leader. He described his participation in the church as very important to him. He had two grown children. Milton, divorced and remarried, served as an officer of the church and had been a long time participant. Milton was also a practicing attorney.

As a whole the sample was predominantly Caucasian, middle age (66%), female (66%), members of the church for an average of 12 years, active participants in Sunday School (58% participate weekly), and actively involved in church leadership (83% serving as elected church officers). At the time of the study, most of the participants reported "regular" experiences of spirit.

Researcher Involvement

As the researcher, my involvement in the research process may have affected the outcomes of the study. Not only did I serve as one of the three pastors of the church that was the site for the study, I also had an ongoing pastoral relationship with the participants in the study. One participant expressed that he felt comfortable writing about his experiences because of the relationship that we had developed over my six years at the church. As researcher, I pointed out

to the group that I was participating in the process with them and wanted to learn more about my own experience of spirit through the study. Throughout the study, I monitored my assumptions and observations using a reflective journal and engaged openly in conversation with participants in order to identify possible effects of my involvement. The study assumed that research is participatory and subjective, focuses on the individual in their social context, and includes the researcher as an active participant (Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As Polanyi (1962) said, “Into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is known, and . . . this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of this knowledge” (p. 6). In this method of research everyone contributes. The next section describes the findings.

Findings

Findings from this study clustered into two major categories: the integration of spirit and experience and the nature of the spiritual experience. Each will be examined in turn.

The Integration of Spirit and Experience

Study participants linked spirit with an experience. The experience occurred most often when a participant engaged in an activity, paused long enough to become aware of the experience, and on reflection attributed the experience to the spiritual. As John, a male participant said:

Sometimes it just came together. Something happened. And sometimes I would just stop and think about it. And sometimes all of a sudden it would just dawn on me that God was trying to tell me something. It didn't happen often but when it did it was amazing.

Participants described their experiences of spirit in a wide variety of ways, although the most common description was “spiritual growth.” When participants used the term spiritual growth, they implied there was an experience, attributed to the spirit, that led to some type of change in their perception, affect, understanding, or behavior. Experience was foundational to participants’ encounter with spirit because, as they explained, spiritual growth was not something you “just talk about or study.” They asserted that experience was inherently a part of their understanding of the spirit. As Ginny said, “It’s the experience that matters, not the words.”

Each participant was asked to complete a written journal for a period of one month, recording descriptions of their experiences of spirit. The high rate of frequency of documented spiritual experience and the changes reported as a result were important indicators of the significance of the experiences. On their own, two participants extended their journal writing process well beyond the time period required by the study design. The twelve participants made an average of 110 journal entries over a month-long period writing an average of 18 pages of text. One participant completed a total of five pages while another completed 85 pages. The twelve journals contained a total of 221 typed pages of text and a total of 1,314 individual entries. Frequency of journal entries for participants varied from once every 3-4 days to several times per day. The number and frequency of entries indicated that the experience of spirit was a relatively frequent occurrence in day to day living and they were important enough that participants took recording them seriously.

Participants appeared to value their experience, citing numerous changes that resulted in their spiritual growth. The response of one male participant is an example, “God spoke to me. It was as if he pointed out areas of my life that needed to be changed. In that moment I was changed. In fact lots of things have changed since then.” Change or growth was frequently cited as an outcome of experiencing the spirit. Types of change varied. Some were very practical. Some led to deep insights. Some included new changes in perspective and behavior. Others led to a direct awareness of God. Sarah said, regarding her spiritual growth, “Sensing God in my life brings me an amazing amount of peace and joy.” Others described a similar feeling using words like “support,” “self confidence,” and “safety.” For some, the encounter with spirit led to new challenges. As one said, “I didn’t plan on making the change. I was led to it. It was hard, but I learned a lot. I’m stronger now.” A male participant spoke of being “confused” and “unsure.” Polly summed up her feeling, “When God comes into my life, often things happen. I get stirred up and I can feel it.” The only way participants could describe an encounter with spirit was to put it in the context of an experience that often led to some type of change such as a greater awareness of God or the resolution of a dilemma or other life problem.

The research process itself was an experience that some described as spiritual. During the second group interview, one participant suddenly became aware of the diversity of spiritual experiences among the group members and had a powerful sense of a community spirit.

How different everyone’s [spiritual growth] experience really is. The words that are used to describe it are different. It’s not like everybody lines up and says here’s what it is and it’s the same. It’s actually different and different for people at different times of life. Different... yet it feels so comfortable.

Some participants noted that the research process was an experience of spirit for them. One individual said, “This whole experience has helped me to grow spirituality.” Another participant, who often was skeptical during the process, wrote at the conclusion: “God is more real to me because of this experience [the research].” While experience was foundational to participants’ spiritual growth, the nature of their spiritual experiences had common elements.

The Nature of the Spiritual Experience

Although the spiritual experiences described by the participants were very diverse, they included four key elements, awareness, reflection, activity, and connection.

Awareness

Experiences of spirit were often associated with intuitive awareness. As several participants stated, “When you have the experience, you know it.” What is awareness? Angela spoke of “special moments when I can be completely present with where I am and am genuinely aware of the presence of a creator.” Such moments are often found in times of solitude, in quiet moments, through observation and “watching one’s own experience of life,” whether in relationships, nature or activities. Participants used such words as “a vivid moment,” an “exciting” and “very moving experience.” More than one participant alluded to a “special experience,” something “different . . . an unusual feeling.” Another said, “It was a special experience and I wasn’t quite sure of what to make of it.”

Awareness often involved “an overwhelming feeling.” Ellie described her experience by saying, “my senses were heightened.” Ginny said, “I could feel his [God’s] presence.” Will

vividly described awareness in an interview: “I don’t know how to describe it. It’s the kind of awake you’d feel if you heard a crash in your house like somebody’s breaking in. Startling, like waking up.” Another participant told of becoming more conscious or aware through the journal writing process: “It [the experience of spirit] makes me more conscious of what I do.”

Awareness is a heightened mindfulness that may not be apparent to others. As Jennifer reported, “I could sense God’s presence... something very spiritual and real was a part of that experience. I knew it, even though you might not have seen anything different.” Spirit was experienced mentally as a perception or thought or affectively as a feeling. Occasionally it was experienced as a physical phenomenon. As Joy said, “I was walking and just felt something.” Participants found the experience difficult to put into words. For many, the words used to describe the experience were much less important than the experience itself. As Ginny said, “I don’t have words, I’m just there. It’s just a wonderful feeling. The more I do that [spiritual activity], the more I grow. You just have to feel it. Experience it.” Sometimes experiences were incidental or unplanned. Often a personal crisis would trigger an experience of spirit. “I didn’t volunteer to have this experience,” Angela remarked in her interview. In some cases the experience was more intentional as participants set out to better understand some spiritual question or topic.

In all cases, no matter how intentional or incidental, participants experienced some unintended dimension to what they set out to do. Associated with that experience was a decision, consciously or unconsciously made, to be open to this unplanned phenomenon. Joy spoke of this openness when she said, “I think it has to happen to you, and I think you have to put yourself out there and be vulnerable and be willing to let it happen to you.” Another said: “Spiritual growth happens when I stop long enough to think, ‘What did I learn from the day and how did the experience affect my life?’” Milton spoke of awareness of spirit as a “light bulb experience,” like a big “Ah Ha.” Jennifer said, “It [the new insight] just jumped out at me.” Two others spoke of insights coming to them in difficult situations “off the top of my head.” Another said, “It dawned on me [awareness] that.... And that gave me a lot to think about [reflection].” Awareness “is when you didn’t know something and you see the light. It’s understanding; [it’s an experience] ...when God becomes real.” When participants reported a greater awareness of God, often that awareness was unexpected. “I wasn’t trying to experience God. It just happened,” Associated with awareness was the process of reflection.

Reflection

Reflection is “a part reflected, or turned back, at an angle; as, the reflection of a membrane; the result of meditation; thought or opinion after attentive consideration or contemplation” (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996, 1998). Jennifer likened the process of reflection to holding up a mirror: “You stand up in front of the mirror and say, ‘Um, golly. Things don’t look the same as they did before.’”

The reflective process took different forms and occurred in varying sequences and intensities for participants. Milton, reflecting on his experience of keeping the journal during his interview, talked about reflection:

I think what it all boils down to is it’s a way of learning from your mistakes, I guess. Nobody wants to run into a brick wall more times than they have to, and if you can go back, I guess that’s the selfish way of looking at it, if you can go back and figure out how to do something better based on your past experiences. If

recording them, writing them down as they happen, and then reflecting on them later helps you out, that's a great way to beat the system.

Reflection occurs over time. The actual reflective process was often anything but peaceful and calm. Sometimes reflection was described as a process of struggle or grappling with an issue or feeling. One female participant, June, wrote in her journal, "I have been struggling in vain, trying to determine why it feels so hard." Another female participant spoke of learning to "grapple once again with my own mother's death." For some the struggle was a catalyst for reflection. Joy, writing in her journal, asked, "Where does this struggle to do something worthwhile that has been mine since childhood come from?"

Participants spoke of reflecting in order to understand something or see what it means. Jack, one of the younger men said, "For me what spiritual growth has meant is coming to different challenges or forks in the road and then either seeking or [being] prodded to seek the meaning and understanding that is greater than basic instincts and reaches far higher." The meaning of the experience may only become clear long after the experience itself perhaps as the result of a contemplative process. Reflection may involve remembering "things we've just forgot." "As I reflect," one participant said, "sometimes things just gel. They get clearer" Another participant spoke of the process of reflection as one of discovering meaning or learning "to see a pattern." Both awareness and reflection were related to activity.

Activity

Participants reported experiences of spirit while they were engaged in activities that occurred in a variety of contexts such as church, work, home, nature, and travel, and included some type of action such as conversation, prayer, silence, walking, writing, service work, and worship. Activities linked to spirit were quite varied, ranging from participation in traditional church rituals or quiet walks in the woods, to listening to concerts, or awakening from sleep. At times, specific activities served as a type of catalyst for spiritual experience. At other times, experiences of spiritual growth led to new activities

Contexts that participants linked to spirit included church, nature, relationship with others and with oneself, and service. For one participant the worship ritual was an important context for her spiritual growth: "I love the worship ritual of the Church, and I go just because I want to bring Christ into my life through that ritual." For another participant, it was the ritual of attending itself that was important: "I find that if I try to stay with a ritual or regimentation in my religious life, I become more aware of the spirit. It's kind of a reminder." Another talked about the power of ritual when she said, "It's comforting to me to feel that today [Sunday] I did this and next week I will do the same thing essentially."

For some participants, the rituals of the church such as the Sacrament of Communion were an important context for spiritual growth. For others it was singing familiar hymns. As one person said, "God speaks to me though those hymns. I think they are inspired." Time too is an important part of activities. "I have spent a lot of time in this church. Church is an important experience, through all the relationships and activities. Church is a very spiritual experience for me." Church was an important context of spiritual growth for participants in this study. Although church was an important context for spiritual activity, participants also reported other contexts that were equally important.

Activities in nature accounted for numerous reported spiritual growth experiences. As Polly said, "I think God uses people; I think he uses scripture; I think he uses nature to just show

who he is.” Another said, “I recognize God's presence in nature.” June was more specific: “I experience God's presence in nature and in weather and in animals.” Another woman said, “I get inspired on mountaintops.” Angela, referring to the beauty of nature said, “The setting alone could call your soul.”

Relating was another activity that provided a context for the experience of spirit. Relationships were most often cited as leading to spiritual growth, and were associated with approximately two thirds of the passages coded. “Inspiration comes when I am with other people,” one participant said. The following response, by a male participant, is typical: “For me communication is the key to spiritual growth, expressing your thoughts or your feelings to others. It can happen anywhere, especially where you least expect it. God touches me through other people.” In the context of the group interview, June seemed to speak for many when she said:

I've been struck by how, in a way, God seems to be a collaborative enterprise. Because a lot of what I've heard [through participating in the group interview experience used in this study] is that God shows up in these relationships and experiences with other human beings in a way that's pretty memorable.

Participants reported experiences of spirit associated with an act of forgiveness, an increased sense of appreciation for a loved one, or a more attentive behavior toward children.

Although participants in this study often mentioned interpersonal relationships as an important context for spiritual growth, the intrapersonal relationship, or relationship that is perceived to occur within the person himself or herself, was also viewed as important. Participants used descriptors such as “a mystery, something I don't understand,” or “deep silence, special moments when I can be completely present to myself” in describing this intrapersonal dimension. Others described their intrapersonal experience as a feeling of emptiness. Ginny said: “I just sat there, totally empty and spent, doing nothing.” Spiritual experiences were often associated with church relationships, work relationships, relationships with friends and family, and were perceived as both positive and negative. Regardless, relationships were often reported as catalysts for the experience of spirit.

Service was another activity that led to spirit. June said, “In my life, my religious experiences happen when I give something with no thought of getting.” For some participants, experiences like that occurred through participation in service activities, such as taking food to the hungry or visits to a prison. For others, their experiences of spirit were more informal and incidental, often associated with “random acts of kindness,” as one participant said.

Prayer was a key activity of spiritual growth and occurred in all reported contexts. Sometimes prayer occurred in the context of church; at other times while a person was alone or with a close friend or family member. “When we pray together,” Dick said, reporting his routine of daily prayer with his spouse, “It always helps. We often feel closer to each other and sometimes we both feel the spirit's presence.”

Spiritual experiences reported in this study were inseparable from activity. In the process of and activity, through awareness and reflection, they made connections that gave their experiences meaning.

Connection

Connection was an important dimension of the experience of spirit. Connections occurred in a variety of ways. Will talked about the connective process:

You can go at it all different kinds of ways, but they're connected. But they're also connected over time so that the experience of my grandmother's death becomes an experience of learning over, and over, and over again in a different way. Or the experience of reading the Bible or reading Psalm 23 becomes another activity leading to further connections over and over and over again.

As exemplified by this statement, connections were made over time through reflection and memory to previous events and persons, as well as to traditions of faith. The connection of experiences, relationships, insights and traditions led to new meaning. For many participants in this study, the process of reflection also led to a particular connection, the identification of an experience as spiritual.

Social psychologists use the term attribution to describe the process of meaning identification. Attribution has long been a subject of research in psychology where researchers have tried to understand why people interpret the same information differently (Jones, 1990). Participants attributed a spiritual dimension to their experiences. Attribution was a conscious act and involved making sense of the experience through memory and reflection. During the process of remembering and reflecting, participants connected their experiences to the spirit. Jack said, "What it [the reflection experience] did do was cause me to look at the spirituality of some of the things that I was doing." The process of reflection led to connections. In reflecting on their experiences, participants came to realize a new meaning associated with an occurrence that they later named as "spiritual" and they attributed that meaning God. Milton reflected on his experience as he said:

I wasn't sure whether that was actually a growth experience or whether it was merely a scared rat just trying to find it's way out of the maze. Now I reflect on it I know it was a spiritual experience. Only later could I say, "I think I was really in a time of spiritual growth and I really learned and I'm better for it.

Connecting experience to elements of faith tradition was common. Sarah spoke of remembering important Bible verses: "As I reflected I heard over and over again in my mind the passage from Psalms, 'Be still and know that I am God.'" For Polly it was her connection of her experience to old favorite hymns. Ritual was also associated with memory, connecting one life experience with another. "The service transported me back to my past. It is something about the ancient habit of calling to God that fills me with reverence each time I participate in worship." For Jennifer the connection was primarily to experiences of faith she had as a child. Connections were made to other people's life experiences; to novels and poetry, and to other faith traditions, as when one participant said, while describing awareness, "This is like mindfulness." Even though participants made connections to many sources, the primary connection to spirit was through their experiences that they attributed to the divine. In a similar vein Kenny (1994) asserts that attribution is essentially "idiosyncratic," that the "uniqueness of the perception is entirely in the mind of the perceiver" (p. 91). The individual's experience is the primary data for meaning making and the basis of their understanding, feelings, and behaviors.

Experience was foundational to participants' spiritual growth and occurred through a process of awareness, reflection, activity, and connection. The experience of these twelve

mainline Presbyterian leaders has important implications for understanding the spiritual growth process and for the practice of religious education in the church. These implications will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of the study was to illuminate the spiritual experiences of adult church members in order to identify the implications that these experiences have for the practice of religious education in the church. Participants described experiences of spirit and spiritual growth interchangeably indicating that a spiritual experience leads to growth, a type of forward progression, or change. In the adult education literature, this type of change that results from experience is called experiential learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). When attributed to the spirit, it might be called spiritual learning (Davis, 2002). The following section will link the participants' experience with experiential learning and discuss the implications of context in shaping the experience. Following this section are the implications of the study for the religious educator, the curriculum of religious education, and the practice of religious education.

A Model of Spiritual Learning

Based on the study's findings, experiences that are attributed to the spirit have four distinct components: awareness, activity, reflection and connection. These components comprise a model of spiritual learning. Although these components occurred in different, sequences and intensities, they were associated with all the spiritual experiences reported in this study.

Merriam & Clark (1993) defined adult learning as "attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one's behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills" (p.131). With the addition of the study finding on attribution or connection, this definition aptly describes the spiritual experiences reported by participants in the study. Spiritual learning is a form of adult learning and shares much in common with the phenomenon of adult learning as identified in the literature (Davis, 2002; Zeph, 2000). The components of spiritual experience described by participants are similar to the taxonomies presented by Kolb (1984), Jarvis (1987), and Boud, Keough, & Walker (1985) that focus on the role of experience, reflection, and action in learning. According to Mezirow (1997), "a defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience" (p. 5). Although similar to the notion of meaning making, which is highlighted as an important part of the adult learning process by many authors, an important difference has to do with the how meaning is interpreted. Distinctive in this study was the way participants interpreted their experiences by attributing them to the spiritual. Attribution represents a distinct type of connection and a key component of spiritual experience.

Components drawn from the documented spiritual experiences of participants in this study suggest a model that may have wider applications. Traditional approaches to adult religious education generally begin with content, a description of some aspect of faith tradition, and ask participants to connect it to their experience. Traditional models that begin with connection to tradition as their primary content rarely address issues of "awareness" or perception (Cranton, 1994) or "wide-awakeness" (Greene, 1978, p. 43) that are important to adults in their spiritual learning (Roof, 1999). Participants are left to make the bridge between the classroom and their particular life experience. This may partially explain why participants for

whom spiritual matters are important report difficulty in integrating formal adult religious education with their lived experience.

Because traditional religious education begins with content and asks the participants to connect the content to their lived experience, there is much less opportunity for participants to focus on *their* experience before trying to connect their experience to aspects of the faith tradition. Traditional adult religious education is content based, cognitive in orientation, and often treats participant experiences as a secondary variable. Even when experience was addressed, participants reported a sense of awkwardness, acknowledging a perceived need to filter what they said about their spiritual experiences when they were in a church setting. They expressed a fear that they would be misunderstood because their experiences did not meet the standard of “acceptability” that they believed was implicitly in place.

Findings from this study support the potential effectiveness of a non-prescriptive learning model that begins with participant experience, incorporates awareness, activity, reflection, and connection, and supports adults as they make authentic connections with the spirit, traditions of faith, and the lives of other people in creative and non-threatening ways, in ways similar to those suggested by Palmer (1983), Boys (1989), Lee (2000), and Groome (1980). The spiritual learning model identified as a result of this study is significant because it is derived from the experience of active mainline church leaders and participants, and addresses participants’ hunger for understanding their spiritual experiences. Although important in themselves, the components of the spiritual learning model did not exist in a vacuum. They were inextricably linked to the context in which they occurred. This linkage also has important implications for the practice of religious education in the church and is addressed in the next section.

The Formal and Informal Context of Spiritual Learning

Context has long been recognized as an important aspect of learning (Jarvis, 1987; Hansman, 2001). Context includes all the socio/cultural variables that impact the learning process. For authors such as Kolb (1984) and Boud, Keough, & Walker (1985) learning is primarily an individual activity and context is less important. For participants in this study the context of learning was inseparable from their experience of spiritual learning,

In this sense learning for participants in this study is “fundamentally situated” (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989, p. 32) or “inextricably linked to that situation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). In situated learning “cognition observed in everyday practice is distributed- stretched over, not divided among- mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings” (Lave, 1988, p. 1). The content for learning is a part of the learner’s daily experience (Shor, 1996). It does not simply provide useful information for the individual, but is actually “inseparable from the cognitive process” (Jacobson, 1996, p. 16). As Wilson (1993) asserts, knowledge is not learned from experience but in experience.

Participants’ learning of spirit in this study was situated in two distinct contexts that might be characterized as a formal church context and an informal learning context. The formal program of the church including religious education is one type of well-defined context where learning occurs. The informal context for church members learning largely exists outside the conscious life of the congregation and is somewhat invisible and disconnected from the church. This finding has important implications for the practice of religious education in the church. The following section describes the two different types of context.

Formal Church Context

Since the research sample involved in this study was made up of individuals who were long time active members, participants and leaders in the church, and church is often thought of as a context where spiritual growth occurs, one would expect to find significant reports of spiritual growth experiences associated with church experiences such as worship or religious education. The church was an important context for participants' experiences of spirit. Of the total number of spiritual growth experiences reported by participants, the Church was the context for about 33%. Church-related spiritual growth activities involved worship services, rituals, retreats, and small group experiences. The church was an important context for participants' experiences of spirit, but not the only context.

What was striking among these participants was that 67% of their spiritual experiences occurred *outside* the life of the church. Also surprising, given the regular participation of this sample in religious education, was the fact that even among the experiences of spiritual growth occurring within the context of the church, none were associated with the religious education program. Worship was the most often mentioned (8 out of 12 participants) as a context for experiencing spirit, followed by occasional mention of small group experiences (mentioned by 4 participants) and retreats (mentioned by 2 participants). Also somewhat surprising was the fact that participants' frequency of attendance at church activities had little to do with the frequency of their spiritual growth experiences. Assuming, as one participant said that "the church is supposed to be in the business of spiritual growth," one might expect participants who have been actively involved in church to report a greater frequency of spiritual experiences. This was not the case. Those who attended church the least reported the highest frequency of spiritual experience. This could be related to the uniqueness of this sample. Another interpretation might be that church activities do not focus on the experience of spirit.

Participants seemed sincere when they reported the context of their spiritual experiences. Given the pastoral relationship of the researcher with the participants, a more socially acceptable response for participants would be to mention the church related experiences and overlook the others (Quigley, 1997; Quigley & Uhland, 2000). These responses may be an indicator of rapport and trust with the researcher (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Fingeret, 1982). Because the responses were unexpected, they make the findings from the study on the informal learning context even more interesting.

Informal Learning Context

Because of the number of reported instances of spiritual learning experiences occurring outside the formal church context, findings suggest that the informal learning context for experiences of spirit is widespread and extends well beyond the religious education classroom. Spiritual learning for participants in this study is situated in contexts beyond the church and those contexts are "inseparable from the cognitive process" (Jacobson, 1996, p. 16).

Participants report a reluctance to discuss their experiences of spiritual learning when those experiences occur outside the church context. Will's comment is suggestive of this. During the interview process he spoke of a "bizarre," "very curious," and "supernatural" experience occurring at the time of his grandmother's death. After describing it, he said, "I haven't talked about this with anyone and I haven't heard anybody talking about things like that [at church]. I haven't pursued it, but sometimes I do wonder." When pressed, he continued saying, "I just wouldn't feel comfortable discussing it at church." The following exchange between the

researcher and a male participant is also illustrative:

“Why do you go to church?” I asked a man in mid-life, a church member for decades and a long time officer in the church.

“Because I want to deepen my experience of God,” he said. “I want to be closer to God in my everyday life.”

“Does your experience at church help you in your efforts?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. “Not much.”

“Why do you go then?” I asked. “Habit, I guess,” he responded. “It’s something my wife and I do as a family.”

“Are there any parts of your life where you do experience God?” I asked.

He thought for a minute and then said, “The place where I really feel closest to God is on the lake, fishing. It’s incredibly beautiful in the early morning when the sun rises, the mist rising off the water. Peaceful. Like a painting. Sometimes I can look at the clouds and feel the energy. I think while I fish, and remember stuff, and even pray. It’s funny how I’ll remember people who need help. The lake is special, like a huge sanctuary. And if you have someone to share it with, really share it... it’s really special.”

“Fishing’s important,” I responded.

“I can’t tell you how important. Some weeks it’s the only thing I do that gives me peace. It nourishes my soul.”

“But it doesn’t have anything to do with church?” I asked.

“Well they’re all kinds of stories in the Bible about fishing, and being outdoors, and the beauty and inspiration of nature, but that’s not what gets talked about on Sunday morning. Besides, I can only do so much talking anyway. I’d rather go fishing.”

The experience of this young man was one of spiritual learning. Engaged in the activity of fishing on the lake, he reflected, perceived beauty, felt energy, received inspiration, experienced nurture, became aware of God’s presence, remembered the needs of others, engaged in prayer, and consciously made the connection of that activity to the presence of God. If learning is defined as “attending to and reflecting on an experience which results in some present or future change in one’s behavior, knowledge, attitude, beliefs or skills” (Merriam & Clark, 1993, p.131), and spiritual learning involves a connection or attribution to spirit, the man learned. The way he learned however is different from the methods common in congregational adult religious education. It was individually oriented, activity based, reflective, heuristic, informal, and in some sense incidental.

The type of learning represented in this sample and common in other experiences reported in this study might be termed informal learning. Informal learning occurs “outside formally structured, institutionally sponsored, classroom based activities... under non-routine conditions” (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 6). Informal learning is “predominantly experiential and non-institutional” (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 7) and is usually “highly intentional but not highly structured” (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 25). It often occurs through experience, has a tacit dimension, is activity focused, and is associated with reflection (English, 2000a). Informal learning has long been identified as an important element in adult education (Knowles, 1980; Watkins & Marsick, 1992). The finding that the majority of experiences of spiritual learning that participants identified in this study occurred outside the formal religious education structure of the church parallels the findings of Marsick and Watkins (1992) that over 80% of learning in the workplace was informal and incidental.

Informal learning is usually self-directed and often has an incidental component. Self directed learning is learning planned, implemented and evaluated by the adults themselves (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) and represents a very common type of adult learning among adults (Tough, 1979). According to Marsick and Watkins (1992), “Incidental learning is unintentional, a byproduct of another activity” (p. 7). Study participants reported both a strong sense of self-direction as well as a strong incidental component in their experiences of spirit. They controlled their learning and also encountered new meaning through spiritual experience in unexpected ways.

Spiritual growth experiences of study participants appear to be a form of informal adult learning. This interpretation builds on the insights of Leona English who identified the importance of informal learning among religious educators in a Roman Catholic school (English, 2000a), the practices of female pastors on rural parishes (English, 1999), and the learning experiences of women involved in international adult education (English, 2002). English (1999) suggests that informal and incidental learning “may well be the number-one form of adult faith development in religious settings, and particularly within the Roman Catholic community” (p. 302). Results from this study suggest that may also be true among mainline Protestant congregations, even those with highly developed cultures of formal religious education.

Wuthnow’s (1998) study of spiritual practice in America describes cultural elements of spirituality as “the things people talk about and the things they do” (p. vii). In this sense participants in this study may have been describing elements of an informal culture of spiritual learning in the church. The frequency of informal learning among participants in this sample has implications for the religious educator, the learning curriculum, and the practice of religious education.

Implications of the Study

Role of the Religious Educator

The widespread practice of informal learning in the church today represents an important opportunity for adult religious educators. According to English (2000a), “Informal and incidental learning are the strongest adult education vehicles the church has at its disposal, and it ought to consider them seriously” (p. 179). This is especially important because of the great interest today in spiritual matters both within and outside the church, and the apparent lack of interest on the part of the majority of church participants in formal religious education as shown by attendance. As English (2000b) has pointed out, mentoring, self direction, dialogue, and journal writing are among the useful strategies in informal learning environments. In this study, the research process involved the use of journals, dialogue and self-direction and participants reported that they perceived this to be an effective form of spiritual learning. The methodology used in this study, a type of participatory inquiry, suggests a way to extend the informal spiritual learning that adults do by making it visible, conscious, and acceptable within the educational program of the church.

My experience as researcher conducting this study was also instructive. The study extended for a year and involved journaling by participants, three group interviews, individual interviews, and numerous informal interactions. Over time the participants and researcher became a type of inquiry group. One participant noted that the study was designed to research spiritual growth but he found that the opportunity actually resulted in more spiritual growth for him. Fundamental in the inquiry process was an assumption of learning. As researcher and

participants, we approached the subject of spirituality with the humility of learners, open to new insights. Participants commented positively on the atmosphere of the study, which one termed “positive and open minded.” The extended time of the study also provided opportunity for the slow and thoughtful incubation of ideas. Other participants noted that as researcher I was supportive, encouraging, and did not prejudice ideas. A part of that role might be described metaphorically as my being like a container that provided a psychic space for individuals to explore their experiences of spirit in reflective ways.

A critical element in the role of the religious educator in supporting informal religious education is to be a learner himself or herself and an advocate for learning in its broad forms, in some ways functioning as a type of spiritual guide, although not as directive as some traditions of spiritual guidance might suggest. The format of the study provides insight into ways to encourage informal dimensions of religious education. These include a focus on continual and broad-based identification of learning resources, development of safe opportunities for reflection, strengthening adults’ skills for learning, and the support of a heuristic learning climate where questions are legitimate, and dialogue is as important as doctrine. Informal ways for conceiving learning and adult education have implications for curriculum.

Curriculum in Adult Religious Education

Traditionally, curriculum is viewed as an integrative factor in adult religious education. Curriculum has been understood in various ways. For Huebner (1982) curriculum is the content made available to students. Dewey (1944) characterizes curriculum as student’s planned and guided learning experiences. Cully (1983) suggests a general understanding of curriculum as the experiences and materials involved in learning and a specific definition as the written courses of study used for Christian education. For Pazmino (1997) curriculum is the “content made available for students and their actual learning experiences guided by a teacher” (p. 224). In congregational religious education practice, curriculum is most often a printed document outlining the subject to be addressed that includes a plan and resources for teaching. This formal curriculum is different from that reported by study participants in their experiences of spiritual learning.

Participants in this study reported a variety of content resources including literature, music, conversations, specific life experience, and introspection. They described learning content in formal religious education programs as interesting but not an important source for spiritual learning. Far more important for learning was their life experience, a finding consistent with informal learning theory (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Participants also cited elements of church tradition and the rituals of the church as meaningful for their spiritual growth, but these were seen as secondary to their experience. For participants in this study the curriculum of spiritual growth begins with experience. The scope of the curriculum is broad and includes many elements not traditionally associated with religious education. The sequence is quite varied, occurring over years in ways that are rarely logical. The traditions of faith are a part of spiritual learning for participants, but they are not normative. Rather they are informative, providing tools for understanding experience. Participants in this study report growing spiritually by making significant use of an informal curriculum extending beyond the boundaries of formal religious education.

For study participants, the operative understanding of curriculum in the process of spiritual growth was similar to William Pinar’s notion of curriculum as a process of

understanding (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1996). Drawing from the etymological understanding of curriculum as *currere*, meaning “to run the racecourse,” Pinar underscores the role of curriculum as a verb, an activity, a process, and an inward journey, rather than a noun that would emphasize the text, document, or the thing itself. This understanding emphasizes the lived experience of participants and focuses on the importance of autobiography in the learning process (Schubert, 1986). Pinar’s method “challenges educators to begin with the individual experience and then make broader connections” (Slattery, 1995, p. 58).

In reflecting on curriculum in Christian Education, Pazmino (1997) states, “Christian content without experience is empty and that experience without content is blind” (p. 224). Study participants underscored a lack of emphasis on spiritual experience in the church’s formal religious education program. In a sense this is a part of the church’s “null curriculum” or what is not taught in an educational program either through oversight or choice (Eisner, 1985). The study also suggests elements of the “hidden curriculum” or that which is implied but not explicit in the content and practice of religious education (Pazmino, 1997, p. 236). In this study a significant element in the hidden curriculum involves topics participants perceive to be undiscussable in religious education, among them, spiritual experience, interpretations, and resources beyond the traditions of the church.

More than once, study participants acknowledged a reluctance to discuss religious or spiritual learning experiences occurring outside the traditional culture of the church, citing a perceived lack of interest and acceptance. When informal experiences of religious or spiritual learning by church members are discussed and acknowledged, they are often viewed negatively with the speaker lamenting the individual’s lack of attendance at liturgy or religious education classes. Such lack of attendance is often judged as a lack of commitment to the church, interest in religion, and genuine faithfulness.

This informal culture of religious or spiritual learning, including its curriculum exists in parallel to the church’s formal religious education program and liturgy, often with very few connections. Among at least a percentage of those regularly involved in church’s life, participation in the formal programs of the church is more or less for social reasons while spiritual nurture occurs informally beyond the walls of the church. Brueggemann (1991) uses the image of two languages to interpret the story of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem (II Kings 18-19), distinguishing between the language used in the faith community and that used beyond the congregation. Seymour, Crain and Crockett (1993) suggest that this means that religious education in the church needs to teach people to be bilingual, to “speak the language of the faith community and also the common languages of public communication” (p. 122). Building on Brueggeman’s image of the two languages, this study suggests existence of an invisible wall *within* the church, separating the conventional understandings and practices of faith from other approaches that are less traditional, less orthodox, less rational, largely undiscussable, and far more common than one might think. Members exist in both worlds, both inside the traditions of faith and outside the walls as they explore the meaning of their experience using a wide variety of resources. Learning takes place in both places, but learning focused on spirit, among this sample at least, occurred more often “beyond the walls.” This expanded context has implications for the practice of religious education in the church.

Practice of Religious Education

Goals are foundational in any educational effort. Historic goals of Christian education focused on an individual's relationship with God and the character of their living as exemplified in words like "conversion and nurture, catechesis and faith development, personal and social transformation" (Foster, 1994, p. 27). From an evangelical perspective, Pazmino (1997) states that "the general purpose of the church's educational ministry is that all persons know of, and develop a dynamic and growing personal relationship with God and his creation" (p. 105). Reflecting on the purpose of religious education, Foster (1994) distinguishes between educational programs designed to meet the needs of learners and endeavors focused on salvation and sanctification. He comments that viewing "education as a 'program' bankrupts a congregation's efforts to initiate people into the ways of thinking and behaving characteristic of the heritage of the church" (Foster, 1994, p. 30).

Education always has programmatic elements (Caffarella, 2002). The question is not whether Christian education is programmatic in nature. The question is what kind of program, including curriculum, method, and environment will be utilized in Christian education, and whether that process will be successful in engaging adults in the church's educational program. If one goal of religious education is to support individuals in their spiritual learning or formation, the locus of religious education is important. Does it occur inside the walls of the congregation using formal approaches to religious education and focused largely on traditions of faith, or outside the walls, focused more informally on participant experiences and their meaning? In order to assist participants in their spiritual learning, this study suggests a need to extend the programmatic purpose of religious education to include attention to individual's experiences of spirit in whatever form they occur and individuals' efforts to make meaning of those experiences, which they often do in informal ways. In today's postmodern environment, the focus of religious education programming needs to extend beyond the walls of the institution and its traditions as a way to help strengthen the spiritual learning of participants.

The report of the Search Institute's national study of Christian Education (Benson & Eklin, 1990), suggested that effective education in the future depends on making significant and thoroughgoing changes in the educational structure, format and assumptions. The study supports the need to address spiritual and religious experience as a foundational element in content or curriculum, and informal learning as a part of the pedagogy of religious education.

Church members both in this sample and the church at large are hungry for spiritual experience and nurture (Roof, 1999; Thompson, 1995). Widespread use of informal learning approaches for spiritual growth point to their importance and potential for effective learning. While there are a number of variables that impact participation in religious education programs (Isaac & Rowland, 2002), the widespread lack of participation in formal adult religious education may also underscore limitations inherent in the formal religious education models currently in use. Foster (2000) also suggests the need for research on informal learning:

A structure is needed that will function as a catalyst to the informal conversations that inform and sustain the learning of formal and technical vocabularies so that they may in turn, ground, critique and renew congregational life and mission. (p. 105)

Informal learning approaches represent a way to supplement formal religious education in the church and hold promise for expanding knowledge about effective practice in adult religious education. This study suggests the need to more fully explore and incorporate informal learning into the church's religious education program and practices in order to better understand this phenomenon as well as support and encourage its use in congregational settings.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further study may indicate that the church needs to devote more time and resources to supporting people in their own learning about spiritual and religious matters. As worship practices have evolved in the American Protestant church exemplified by the addition of contemporary worship experiences conducted in different styles and contexts, perhaps religious educators need to develop programs that support informal adult religious education to compliment more formal approaches. Such efforts will be challenging, as the nature of informal learning is inherently un-programmatic, and will require further study. Additional research on the potential for mentoring, inquiry groups, and the use of journaling, dialogue and reflection, as well as the potential of information technology in such a program of informal learning might also contribute to expanding the effectiveness of adult religious education in the church.

Conclusion

Church members' spiritual learning often occurs in the context of the widespread practice of informal religious education existing quite apart from the formal religious education program and official practices of the church. This learning context is not a part of the mainstream of religious education because of the reluctance of participants to discuss their experience in the context of church programs, what appears to be the church's unwillingness to entertain a broad range of questions about experience and tradition in religious education programs, and the lack of a pedagogy that supports informal learning in congregational settings.

Reflecting on the experience of adults both inside and beyond the walls of the church, Thompson (1995) cites a "powerful impulse toward spiritual wholeness at a time of unprecedented personal and social fragmentation" (p. 2). For some in the church that change is threatening. As Charry (1999) notes, some:

Wonder what spirituality is, and even whether it is Christian. From a strongly Word-oriented tradition it may appear to fill a gap that is not there, more an add-on than essential to Christian faithfulness. And if its forms are imported from non-Christian or even pagan sources... spirituality may look like little more than another celebration of self that further vitiates proper Christian confession and proclamation, dependent as these are on the ubiquity of sin. (p. 1)

Others see those who participate in these spiritual quests as a part of a larger ecclesiastical evolution. As Roof (1999) observes: "The boundaries of popular religious communities are being redrawn, encouraged by the quests of the large, post-World War II generations, and facilitated by the rise of an expanded spiritual marketplace" (p. 10). The human encounter with God is a powerful experience that overshadows issues of doctrine, tradition, and custom. John 3:8 alludes to this when it says: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (NRSV). As William James (1920) pointed out decades ago:

What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of logically concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon a mass of concrete religious experiences, connecting themselves with feeling and conduct that renew themselves in *saecula saeculorum* in the lives of humble private men [sic]. If you ask what these experiences are, **they are conversations with the unseen** [emphasis mine], voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, assurances of support, whenever certain persons set their own internal attitude in certain appropriate ways. (pp. 427-8)

The conversations continue, recognized or not, both within the church and without. The question is whether we who are a part of the formal apparatus of religious education in the church will notice.

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